Semiotics of culture and intercultural communication

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The main topics of this lecture are the following five ones:

1. Natural language (« langue ») and languages (« langages »)
2. The language community
3. Linguistic and pragmatic knowledge
4. Definitions of « language cultures »
5. The case of diglossic language communities
1st topic

- Natural language and languages -
As typical examples of natural languages are considered languages:

- that are acquired in a first socialisation process by every speaker of a given linguistic community (a given language actor) previous to any formal or institutionalized education

- and that constitute the basic and necessary communication and exchange means of any other social actor (state, nation, political actor, scientific actor, media actor, economic actor, ...) elaborating, on the basis of a natural language other, more specialised languages adapted to its needs and interests.

Examples of natural languages are languages associated with the destiny of historical states and nations (Greek, Latin, English, French, Mandarin, Hindi, ...) or traditional “ethnic” (rural, pastoral, ...) communities or again creoles.

Examples of languages that are not considered to be natural languages are pidgins, secret languages, functionally specialised languages (in media, science, law, ...).
Remember: languages are called “natural” because –

- they not only pre-exist (like other languages) they individual who has to acquire it in order to participate in the life of a social actor
- but they also constitute the basis for the elaboration of any other (verbal) language system (scientific languages, technical languages, literary languages, …)

A natural language is an ubiquitous communication means but it is not the only one;

A natural language is a verbal sign system where each sign:

- possesses a phonetic or graphical expression form (i.e. “signifiant”);
- possesses a characteristic conceptual or meaning pattern (i.e. “signifié”).
Example: the word “student” in the phrase “the young student learns English”:

- is a lexical morpheme (and not a grammatical one);
- belongs to the category “noun” (and not, for instance, to the category “verb”, “adverb”, …);
- is in singular nominative (1st case) mode (and not, for instance, in plural nominative, singular accusative, …);
- forms – with two other signs – the nominal phrase (NP) in the position of the grammatical subject of the phrase (and not, for instance, the NP of a direct object, the PP, …);
- possesses the meaning of a human engaged in a knowledge acquisition process (“student”);
- is a part of the content of an affirmative proposition (i.e. a “fragment” of a discourse where the “speaking subject” ascertains that 1) there is a student, 2) who is young and 3) who learns English);
- is a written (printed) sign (and not, for instance, a speech object).
Natural language as the (knowledge) object of linguistics

- is not only an object characterized by phonetic, grammatical and lexical schemas
- but also – and even more crucially - by schemas or patterns enabling it to be used in practically all communication and interaction contexts.

Studied linguistic schemas are, for instance:

- morphological schemas (example: composition schemas of a lexical stem and “word endings”);
- lexical schemas (example: composition schemas between different lexical signs);
- phrase schemas (example: composition schemas of nominal phrases, verbal phrases, …);
- speech act and discourse interaction schemas;
- rhetorical and genre schemas used for oral or written text production;
- etc.
“La langue” is in this sense:

- a cognitive resource for a social actor called “language” or more precisely “linguistic community”;
- a cognitive resource – the “linguistic competence” - of the social actor for –
  - designing objects and situations in the (real or imagined) “world”,
  - actualising and organising them as information in “texts” (very broadly speaking),
  - communicating and exchanging these “texts”
  - preserving and transmitting these “texts” over spaces and times.
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1st topic

Natural language and languages

- The linguistic study of “la langue” : different perspectives, different problems

1) Language typology

- identification, description and classification of languages in “language families” following their (morphological, lexical, phonological, ...) characteristics (examples: the Indo-European language family, the Austronesian language family, ...)

2) Language evolution

- (Hypothetical) reconstruction of the historical phases of one language, a language family or the human language itself (example the reconstruction of the historical stages of German; the reconstruction of an hypothetical proto-indo-European; the hypothetical reconstruction of human language genesis, ...)
The linguistic study of “la langue” : different perspectives, different problems

3) Features of a universal grammar of human languages

(Hypothetical) reconstruction of features that are supposed to be common to all human languages (such as schemas of word ordering, schemas of how to express linguistic temporality, schemas of how to express a possessive relationship, speech act schemas, …)

4) Language functionality

Description and explanation of the (morphological, lexical, phonological, …) characteristics of a language with respect to their roles and tasks within human society and communication (such as the varieties of personal pronoun systems with respect to a given social stratification of a society or an “ethnie”, etc.)
A first central distinction: “langue” vs “parole”:

- **Parole:**
  
  - the use of linguistic schemas or patterns of a natural language in given social contexts for producing and communicating information.

- **Langue**
  
  - the presupposed competence of a speaker to use linguistic schemas.

- This competence is acquired either through a first socialisation process (cf. the case of the so-called “mother tongue”) or through secondary linguistic acquisition processes (cf. the case of “second natural language” resources of a speaker)
La parole recovers:

- the conform and **appropriate use** of a linguistic resource with respect to a given **social context**

**Examples:** private family rituals, informal public conversation rituals, institutionalised exchange rituals, daily life rituals, religious rituals, …

- the (individual or collective) **performances** of users of a linguistic resource in a given social context which are classified in form of preferential “speaking styles” (“correct”, “poor”, “elegant”, “classic”, …)
A second central distinction: “langue” and “langage”:

- on the basis of a natural language, more functionally specialised languages are elaborated in order to better accomplish the communication and information exchanges within a specific social actor.

Examples of such specialised or “secondary elaborated” languages:

- **Scientific and technical languages** in order to precise as much as possible a communication or an information exchange;

- **Languages used in “closed” communities** (youth groups, gangs, religious groups, ...) in order to preserve a secret cohesion and internal communication opportunity;

- **Languages used for persuasive purposes** (marketing, publicity, ...) 

- **Languages used in order to grasp imagined worlds and scenarios,** ...
2nd topic
- Language communities –
One of the **most central functions** of a natural language is to enable at least basic communication and all forms of verbal information exchange between the participants within a social actor called “linguistic” or “language community” (i.e. people who share – approximately – the **same language standards**)

**Examples:**
- the French speaking community (i.e. French speaking people leaving in France, Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, or in any other country or place);
- the English speaking community in the world,
- etc.

An individual belongs to a linguistic community if he/she has an access to a given natural language as a symbolic resource for communication; “access” means:
1. knowledge of a given language as a “general communication resource”,
2. knowledge of how to use a language in specific social contexts.
A language or linguistic community:

- is a specific type of social actors (i.e. it cannot be reduced to other types of social actors such as, for instance, nations, ethnies, religious communities, ...);
- but it maintains always and necessarily tight relationships with specific types of social actors.

Example: the linguistic community of French speakers

- French as the national language of French citizens in France;
- French as a minority language of Canadian citizens;
- French as the dominant language in Bretagne, Alsace, etc;
- French as a second language (not “mother tongue”) in France (Corsica, south France, Alsace, ...);
Example: the linguistic community of French speakers

- French as an official ("administrative") language or a language of a political and economic elite in ancient French colonies and protectorates;

- French as a privileged language of local (intellectual, artistic, …) elites all over the world;

- French as the classical language of diplomacy;

- French as a “creolized” language in the Antilles, Reunion, Tahiti …;

- French as a specialised language in the medias, in technology and science, in marketing…;

- Etc.
Every culture is provided with a sort of cognitive meta-level that enables a social actor to reflect and interpret

- its specificity and identity,
- its historical (mythical) destinee,
- the other (i.e. other social actors)
- and especially possible scenarios of (its) life world (Lebenswelt).

This meta-level is constituted by specialised sign systems: « secondary modelling systems » (in the sense of Y. Lotman)

Examples of secondary modelling systems:

- arts and literature;
- science;
- (secularised) ideological systems and elaborations;
- mythological, religious and para-religious systems;
- etc
3rd topic
- Linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of language -
3rd topic

Linguistic and pragmatic knowledge

- **(Natural) Language:**
  - is a *general* communication and information exchange *means* of a social actor
  - but in being used, it has possibly to be *attuned* to the specific features and constraints of the *contexte* in which it is used.

**Example:** French

- Is a general cognitive communication resource for the language community of French speakers
- But in being used in intimate, private, daily life routine, professional, official, … situations, it is attuned to the specificities of these situations.

- The attuning of a (natural) language can be examined on all of its constitutive structural levels: phonetics and prosody, grammar, lexicon, discourse and rhetorics, …
“Knowing of a (natural) language as a general communication means: “linguistic competence” (broadly speaking): grammar, lexicon, phonetics, discourse types and genres, …

“Knowing of how and where to use a language: pragmatic competence (broadly speaking): the appropriate use of a language in situations which are relevant for a social actor

Question of “linguistic and pragmatic knowledge”:

✓ point of view of an individual (“person”) participating in a linguistic community and its culture

✓ (i.e. the point of view of the “speaker” or, more generally, the “user of a language”)
3rd topic
Linguistic and pragmatic knowledge

- Linguistic and pragmatic competence as a **symbolic capital** (P. Bourdieu)

- “Access” to the specific sign resources constituted by a given natural language: “primary” and “secondary” socialisation processes, i.e. learning processes such as:

  - first language acquisition ;
  - second language acquisition ;
  - acquisition for professional uses ;
  - etc.
Linguistic and pragmatic competence as a symbolic capital
(P. Bourdieu)

But « access » means also:

- Forced, obligatory access to a specific sign resource such as a « dominant » language, a « lingua franca”, a “common language”, etc.

Furthermore “access” is unequal:

- extreme cases (pathology, …);
- social inequalities;
- political and economical inequalities;

In this sense, linguistic knowledge constitutes a symbolic capital in the sense of Bourdieu:

- symbolic capital: good speakers, nobles, efficient people in communication, etc.
4th topic

- Four approaches of understanding a language culture -
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4th topic

Understanding the notion of « language culture »

- Four approaches of understanding a “language culture”:

  1) **language pattern** that characterizes a social actor (a family, a group, an ethnie, a national state, …).

  2) the **indigenous** theories, ideas, philosophies and also policies of language, the origins of language, the function of language, of the use and norms of language, etc.

  3) the **socio-linguistic competences** (abilities, skills, …) of members of a social actor or again of people who have to deal with a social actor. (i.e. social reproduction and linguistic competence, acquisition of a language in a social setting, training via high cultural vs low cultural capital, …)

  4) the **(covert or overt) policies** of a social actor “regulating” (ruling out) the norms and appropriated uses of languages
Four approaches of understanding a “language culture”:

1) Language pattern that characterizes a social actor (a family, a group, an ethnie, a national state, …).

Example: the language culture of an (international) company

- common “lingua franca” (often some form of English),
- native languages of the people;
- different specialised languages (based, generally, on the lingua franca, but also possibly on a mixture of different natural languages) between people working in different sectors of the company
- forms of “pidgins” (“reduced” languages) between people who don’t share a common lingua franca
- symbolic status of the these different languages and contexts of use of them.
Four approaches of understanding a “language culture”:

2) The “indigenous” theories, ideas, philosophies and also policies of language, the origins of language, the function of language, of the use and norms of language, etc.

Examples: the “indigenous” (folk) ideas of German (French, …) language speaking communities

- the (imagined) specificities and degrees of difficulty of the language based on personal, practical or simply related experiences
- the (imagined) proximity of such a language with other languages
- the (imagined) origins of such a language
- the (imagined) beauty, “melodiousness” of a language
- the (imagined) correct, incorrect (dialectal, …) uses of such a language, …
Four approaches of understanding a “language culture”:

3) The socio-linguistic competences (abilities, skills, …) of members of a social actor or again of people who have to deal with a social actor. (i.e. social reproduction and linguistic competence, acquisition of a language in a social setting, training via high cultural vs low cultural capital, …)

Examples: the socio-linguistic competencies of a French (English, …) speaker in interacting with other social actors

- Daily life conversation abilities in special places (shops, agencies, streets, bars, …)
- Access and use of an appropriate specialised language in order to enter in contact with a professional (administrative, scientific, …) social actor and to interact with him;
- Learning opportunities of specific communication and information exchange means in order to participate in the “life course” of a “closed” social actor (a youth group, a religious community, …)
Four approaches of understanding a “language culture”:

4) The (covert or overt) policies of a social actor “regulating” (ruling out) the norms and appropriated uses of languages

Examples: the (language) language policies of a country

- Alphabetisation policies for primary schools;
- Writing reforms of a competent administration obligatory for the whole country
- “Official” language substitution planning in “new” (ex-colonial) countries;
- Terminological standards for specialised communication and information exchange
- Text production standards for specialised communication situations (in administration, commerce, law, technology, …)
5th topic

- The case of diglossic speech communities -
Term introduced by Charles Ferguson[1]: “Diglossic communities” possess a High variety Language that is very prestigious and a Low variety Language with no formal or “official” status.

[i] Ferguson, Ch. 1959. Diglossia Word 15: 325-337

Example:
- High variety: literary discourse,
- Low variety: ordinary conversation.

Diglossia identifies a typical (and widespread if not universal) pattern of linguistic behaviour where there exists:

- a typical role assignation to each one of the disposable languages or language varieties
- a complementary distribution between the roles.

Roles:
- “H” (high variety)
- “L” (low variety)
Examples of H-norms:

“… ‘Formal' domains such as public speaking, religious texts and practice, education, and other prestigious kinds of usage are dominated by the H norm…”[i]

Examples of L-Norms:

“… the L norm is used for informal conversation, jokes, street and market, the telephone, and any other domains (e.g. letter writing, cinema, television) not reserved for the H norm”. (H. Schiffman[ii]).

[i] Harold Schiffman, Diglossia as a sociolinguistic situation (http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~haroldfs/messeas/diglossia/handbuk.html)

[ii] Harold Schiffman, Diglossia as a sociolinguistic situation (http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~haroldfs/messeas/diglossia/handbuk.html)
Dynamic changes within diglossic patterns: from an historic point of view, a L-language can become a H-language

Example:

- the formerly L-language *demotiki* which has replaced the prior H-language *katharevousa* in present-day Greece;

- the former L-language Swiss German which replaces the H-language *Schriftdeutsch*,

- etc.

Example:

- The French in French Canada has been considered and politically confined in a L-position during a long period;

- Actually, it occupies in French Canada the H-position (with English)
Linguistic relationships of diglossic situations:

- **“classic diglossia”** (in-diglossia or again endo-glossia, following H. Schiffman):
  
  diglossia between two (genetically, typologically) related languages (i.e. Schriftdeutsch and Swissgerman; Modern Standard Arabic and Arabic dialects, High German and German dialects)

- **“extended diglossia”** (out-diglossia or again exo-dglossia, following H. Schiffman):
  
  diglossia between two genetically (typologically, ...) not or unrelated languages (Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, Russian, English, ... in modern Israel; Spanish and Guarani in Paraguay, Latin and national languages in Early Middle Age in Europe, ...).
Discussion, consequences of the diglossic linguistic culture pattern

1) Diglossic language situations:

- expressions, manifestations of a specific form of a linguistic culture of a social actor

- with a distribution of two or more varieties of one language or two or more different – genetically related or unrelated - languages on a H-/L-norm scale.
Discussion, consequences of the diglossic linguistic culture pattern

2) A diglossic pattern is a historical one:

- it changes through especially social pressures (i.e. social practices within a social actor or a community of social actors).

- L-languages may become H-languages or again there may be linguistic policies to “elevate” L-languages (like Swiss German or again the elevation dialectal forms in German as “official” languages”, languages for artistic production, etc.)
Discussion, consequences of the diglossic linguistic culture pattern

3) A diglossic pattern is one specific pattern of linguistic culture of a social actor. Other – more or less – similar patterns are:

- “secrete languages”,
- “group specific languages”,
- “specialized languages”,
- “creolized” or “pidgin” languages,
- the possession of a “foreign language” (second learned language),

Such forms of language co-exist with another “official” or common language.

The distribution of these two different types of languages must not always must not always follow a H-/L-scale.

It can also follow a distribution corresponding to their communicative functions.
Discussion, consequences of the diglossic linguistic culture pattern

4) Diglossia and multilingualism:

More generally speaking, this means that a social actor that possesses two or more languages, assigns to each one of these languages typical roles and communicative functions.

In other words, bi- or multilingualism as a socio-linguistic phenomenon

- is not an unorganized one
- but refers to the fact that a language (or a language variety) is shaped and used by specific norms of linguistic usage relevant for a given social actor.
Discussion, consequences of the diglossic linguistic culture pattern

5) Again more generally speaking, a diglossic pattern represents a specific linguistic culture of a social actor that is a part of its semiotic culture.

A culture possesses its “semiosphere” composed of a given diversity of sign systems and language which constitute the multilingual nature generally speaking of that culture …

Examples:

- the strategic and appropriate use of gestures (“behavioural signs”) and a given verbal language in a social situation;
- the coherent and appropriate use of “second modelling systems” (music, literature, …) and verbal languages;
- the coherent and appropriate use of “socio-semiotic” sign systems (clothing, consumption products, services, …) and verbal languages, etc.